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Forum: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities

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Forum Introduction: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities

Chris A Eng and Amy K King

ABSTRACT Edited by Chris A Eng and Amy K King, this first of a two-part forum identifies and contemplates the emergent potential of four analytics for imagining alternative humanities. Structuring thought across disciplines, these analytics resonate strongly with the specific ways that cultural studies shifted, developed, and refined its ideas and focus: J. Kōhaulani Kauanui takes up settler colonialism; Kyla Wazana Tompkins, New Materialism; Julie Avril Minich, disability; and Jodi Melamed, institutionality.

Our contemporary moment is so replete with assumptions that freedom is made universal through liberal political enfranchisement and the globalization of capitalism that it has become difficult to write or imagine alternative knowledges, to act on behalf of alternative projects of communities. Within this context, it is necessary to act within but to think beyond our received humanist tradition and, all the while, imagine a much more complicated set of stories about the emergence of the now, in which what is foreclosed as unknowable is forever saturating the "what-can-be-known." We are left with the project of visualizing, mourning, and thinking "other humanities" within the received genealogy of "the human."

—Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents"¹

Scholars of postcolonial studies and minority discourses have pointed toward the violences of the humanities, in which knowledge and the ideals of freedom are conceived around "Western Man." Undergirding the bases of our intellectual practices and assumptions, this centering of Man not only structurally reproduces hierarchical valuations on race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and nationality, but also fails to account for the production of these social differences as the foundational violence upon which Man is (re)constituted. Thinkers including Denise Ferreira da Silva, Franz Fanon, Roderick Ferguson, Lisa Lowe, Alexander Weheliye, and Sylvia Wynter have challenged the epistemologies of Enlightenment philosophy and the legacies of liberal humanism that continually render other ways of being and living unthinkable and impossible.² As scholar-teachers positioned across intimately interconnected fields of cultural studies, American studies, and critical ethnic studies oriented toward politically radical intellectual work, how do we grapple with these legacies? What forms of new methods and knowledges can attend to and challenge the material violences that these legacies have wrought? In critiquing the impasse of working within liberal notions of freedom under contemporary global capitalism, Lisa Lowe enjoinders us to collectively conceptualize "'other humanities' within the received genealogy of 'the human.'" Given the dominant nature of humanities and its ideas, this task of imagining and enacting alternative humanities is more urgent and difficult than ever. Taking up Lowe's call for radically re-envisioning the humanities by

rethinking the terms of the human, the emergent critical analytics we consider in this forum both trace and call further attention to resonant inquiries that collectively attend to, interrogate, and shift assumptions about the bodies of the human(ities) underwriting our scholarly engagements—the body of the nation, the human body, and the body of the academic discipline.

This forum examines how movements in scholarship around settler colonialism, new materialisms, disability, and institutionality have profoundly unsettled key foundations of scholarly inquiry. We argue that these emergent critical analytics provide pivotal points of entry into the task of radically reconceptualizing the dominant bodies of the human(ities). The emergent, as Raymond Williams describes it, can only be apprehended retrospectively for what appears to be emergent can become incorporated into the dominant and lose its oppositional potential.³ Thus, what appears in Williams's terms as a sense of the purely emergent—as oppositional to dominant processes of incorporation—may perhaps be best seen as an ideal. Noting the difficulties of this sense of the emergent as oppositional rather than merely alternative to the dominant, Williams suggests that we might attend to and create new forms and conditions of “pre-emergence” that facilitate such possibility.⁴ This forum identifies and collectively contemplates the critical potential of four analytics for providing the conditions for such pre-emergence. In this sense, we understand that the analytics themselves are inherently contradictory and that their meanings, functions, and effects can materialize in divergent ways. Thus each scholar reassesses these terms precisely to mine the contestations each indexes, elucidating both how their deployment might unintentionally replicate the tenets of the human that they aim to interrogate and the ways in which the existing theoretical and political work coalescing around these terms gesture toward radical pathways for alternative humanities.

To approach these double objectives, we contemplate the following questions:

1. What, if any, common trends around the deployment of these analytics have worked to inadvertently reaffirm the dominant frameworks of the humanities and their unequal power structures?
2. What have been some of the most promising emergent practices around these terms—settler colonialism, new materialisms, disability, and institutionality—that problematize these dominant models?
3. Keeping the tensions between these first two questions in mind, how might scholarly practices work to maintain a critical self-reflectivity that continually undermines the problematics of the dominant and foregrounds the emergent critical energy around these analytics?
4. In what ways might scholar-teachers account for the (re)thinking of these analytics in their pedagogical practices?

In this sense, the articles in this forum work through the pitfalls of replicating the dominant and provide critical methods for potentially maintaining friction in these incorporative maneuvers.

During the last two decades, the putative transnational turn across a number of disciplines has compelled interrogation of the privileging of the nation-state as the ideal object of analysis by examining histories of empire and colonialism. While the transnational turn has provided generative new approaches in many fields, scholars have cautioned against not only comparative approaches that sanctify the primacy of the nation-state as discrete units, but also fundamental ideas about belonging and relationality that privilege the epistemologies of the nation-state and its constitutive racialized violences. At the same time, invocations of settler colonialism in scholarship can

also unwittingly reproduce this privileging of the nation, especially when included purely as a citational practice. Instead, [J. Kēhaulani Kauanui](#) discusses the distinctive shifts toward examining Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism as 'a structure, not an event.' Kauanui argues that a substantive engagement with settler colonialism also demands a deep rethinking of the associated concept of indigeneity—distinct from race, ethnicity, culture, and nation(ality)—along with the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies.

Theorizations of new materialisms and disability have been pivotal as two interconnected but distinct efforts in interrogating the liberal conceptions of the normative human body that rationalized projects of Western imperialism. However, as history has shown, not all modes of rethinking the human are inherently revolutionary. [Kyla Wazana Tompkins](#) and [Julie Avril Minich](#) both caution against how certain critical reassessments of the human body can replicate uneven power structures. Tompkins questions the structures informing claims of newness posed by discussions of "New Materialism." She discusses the troubling ways in which these discourses, in turning toward the post- or non-human, can ironically reinforce assumptions about a universal human subject and elide considerations of gender, race, and power. Also addressing the elision of race in disability studies, Minich in turn traces the histories of normative care of bodies that are seen as personal/private property. Advising against the potential ways in which scholarship might take up disability by fetishizing difference and reaffirming dominant models of able-bodiedness, Minich calls for work to be first and foremost accountable to people with disabilities: this means making knowledge accessible. Moreover, Minich reminds us that much of the labor for accessibility is individualized, as some of the most vulnerable members of academic departments often take up this labor without institutional support. In order for knowledge to be accessible, Minich stresses, the labor of accessibility must be addressed on an institutional level.

Lastly, [Jodi Melamed](#) reassesses the analytic of institutionality, which has largely been theorized as a dominant tool of the university in incorporating the emergent and muting the oppositional. In particular, scholars in American and cultural studies have noted how universities responded to the revolutionary calls of radical social movements by institutionalizing ethnic and gender studies into compartmentalized sets of knowledge production. In so doing, the university worked to manage minority difference through flat notions of representation rather than redistribution. The interdisciplines of ethnic and gender studies then became additives to the humanities, upholding the status quo rather than compelling a radical re-envisioning of these academic structures altogether. On an even more macro level, Melamed identifies dominant discussions of institutionality that see global neoliberalism as a new, all-totalizing force. In problematizing how these theorizations elide considerations of the historical conditions of racial capitalism that make possible the 'global,' Melamed also excavates a genealogy of radical resistance that might allow us to rethink institutionality toward collective solidarity.

Call for/and Response

To formally reflect this project of imagining institutionality otherwise toward alternative humanities, this forum will stage conversations between established scholars and emerging scholars (students and junior faculty). Conventional institutional structures often premise a generational approach that privileges linear models of academic development, which can often be reproduced even within formal and informal practices of mentorship. In contrast, we aim to lateralize this relationship by juxtaposing comments by scholars across various institutional positions and intellectual trajectories side-by-side so that unexpected new relationalities may arise from these collaborations. In what ways might the stakes and uses of these analytics—settler colonialism, new materialisms,

disability, and institutionality—in research and teaching shift based on one’s professional position and locale? How might students, recent graduates, contingent faculty, nontenured or junior scholars approach these analytics otherwise?

To further contemplate these inquiries, we now solicit responses (1000-2000 words) from emergent student and junior faculty voices. Submissions may (a) respond to one or more of the four analytics posed here or (b) propose another analytic in line with the objectives outlined in this forum. Responses should be submitted for consideration to Chris A. Eng (ceng@gradcenter.cuny.edu) and Amy K. King (aking83@gatech.edu) by October 1, 2016. We invite further conversations to collectively reflect on and strategize about the continual practices needed for these emergent critical analytics and the models necessary for materializing alternative humanities.

Notes

1. Lisa Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 208. [↗](#)
2. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963); Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 19–70; Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2004): 257–337; Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). [↗](#)
3. Of course, in her larger monograph, Lisa Lowe also makes use of Williams’s concepts to chart the multivalence of intimacy within a larger political economy. Our project here thinks alongside her engagement with Williams’s in considering the dominant, residual, and emergent intimacies. See Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. [↗](#)
4. Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent,” *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–127. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



Chris A Eng

Chris Eng is Assistant Professor of English and the Emerson Faculty Fellow at Syracuse University. He received his PhD in English from The Graduate Center, CUNY. He is currently working on his book manuscript entitled *Dislocating Camps: On Queer Aesthetics, State Power & Asian/Americanist Critique*; its dissertation form won the CLAGS 2016 Paul Monette-Roger Horwitz Dissertation Prize. His writings have appeared in *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Lateral*, and *Women & Performance*. Chris previously served on the MLA Delegate Assembly and currently chairs the Queer Studies Section of the Association for Asian American Studies. In 2016–2017, he was a Post-Doctoral Research Associate in Asian American Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

**Amy K King**

Amy K. King is a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her current book project places depictions of women at the center of her inquiry to interrogate their involvement in empires throughout the "New World." King argues that a substantial number of recent written and visual texts employ depictions of violence between women to illuminate grotesquely violent cultural norms enacted on and continuing beyond plantation settings. Portions of this work appear in the edited collection *Reading/Speaking/Writing the Mother Text: Essays on Caribbean Women's Writing* (Demeter Press 2015). King also has two recent essays in *Mississippi Quarterly* and *south: a scholarly journal* that reconsider comparative methodologies for hemispheric American studies.



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